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COVID-19 and the modern plantation: debunking the neoliberal moral economy

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Abstract

Plantations have long been justified by moral and racial hierarchies that value specialised, export-oriented producers over domestic or subsistence-oriented producers. In this paper, I associate this value hierarchy with the neoliberal moral economy, explain its roots in classical political economy, provide examples of its workings and argue that the Covid-19 crisis provides a crucial opportunity to debunk the (neo)liberal moral economy. Collective experiences of food insecurity wrought by the pandemic expose the fallacy of central moral economic values underpinning industrial capitalist food supply chains, such as comparative advantage. Shared experiences of food supply chain failures, borne by people in the global North as well as the South, strengthen the moral and economic legitimacy of alternatives.

Keywords

Moral economy, food supply chains, plantation economy, racial inequalities, neoliberal

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Introduction

Satnam Virdee¹ has argued that racism was fundamental to the development of capitalism. From the time of colonialism, moral distinctions have separated economically rational individuals from backward rural 'others' who are often racialized.² Colonial policies that favoured one ethnicity over another, such as the selective favouring of Afro- or Indo-Trinidadians,³ enabled elites to set subaltern groups against one another,⁴ thwarting class alliances as well as alternative configurations of food and farming.⁵ As in the past, modern plantations continue to work through moral economic and often racialized binaries between specialised, export-oriented production/producers and domestic or subsistence-oriented production/producers.

The recent disruption to global food supply chains wrought by Covid-19 provides an unprecedented opportunity to debunk such moral economic distinctions. In this brief essay, I

argue that collective experiences of food insecurity wrought by the pandemic expose the fallacy of the liberal, and now neoliberal, moral economy that underpins our food system. Shared experiences of food supply chain failures, borne by people in the global North as well as the South, strengthen the moral and economic legitimacy of alternatives.

Liberalism as a moral economy

Most scholars associate the term 'moral economy' with non-capitalist economies, where norms of fairness or justice guide transactions between a (para)statal authority and a group of people, such as peasants.⁶ Yet, as I have argued elsewhere,⁷ liberalism is a moral economy like any other, as it too establishes norms for 'good' economic behaviour that ensure justice for all. Central to the moral economy of liberalism are concepts that stem from classical treatises on political economy, written by European men during the initial stages of imperialism. One crucial theorist is Adam Smith, whose ideas of free trade and competition ascribed universal wealth to the unfettered flow of supply and demand between economically rational, self-interested individuals (in Smith's time, these were only white, propertied men). Living during the height of the Atlantic slave trade and creating moral economic arguments used by *both* pro- and anti-slavery writers,⁸ Smith contended that free trade should be scaled up to the level of countries competing in a global marketplace, and that this form of economic organisation would establish universal prosperity for all.

David Ricardo, who lived a generation after Smith, disputed the latter's formulation; yet his concept of 'comparative advantage' continues to be extolled as a counterpart to Smith's ideas.⁹ For Ricardo, the power comparative advantage – the mutual gains from specialised production and free trade – rested on the belief that it would level the playing field between rich and poor people and places: 'The rhetorical power of the theory of comparative advantage rests on its promise that everyone will emerge a winner.'¹⁰ Yet, despite claims about universality, comparative advantage theory centres on specialised export production, creating a value hierarchy that places global market actors above peasants and others who produce goods for their families and communities.

Questioning comparative advantage theory

In his *On the Principles of Political Economy and Taxation* (1817), Ricardo quantified the mutual benefits of specialised trade between a hypothetical Portugal and a hypothetical England trading in wine and cloth, respectively. His formulation has been criticised for its simplistic assumptions about complex socio-economic realities. First, the theory assumes perfect factor mobility, or the idea that in the event of an external shock both labour and capital can be redirected from one productive activity to another, without anyone losing out.¹¹

This is not usually the case, and apart from certain exceptions (e.g. Monsanto's re-deployment of factories from herbicides in the 1940s to the production of Agent Orange during the Vietnam War, and then back to herbicides in the 1970s), fixed capitals are not so flexible.

A second assumption of Ricardian comparative advantage is that, in a free market, all countries or firms are able to access and use the 'best' technology for specialised production, even if the technology is developed elsewhere.¹² Yet as institutional economist Ha-Joon Chang¹³ has shown, technological and industrial development in high-income countries became possible only through the *suspension* of comparative advantage in lower-income countries – that is – through restrictions on international technology transfer maintained by tariffs, subsidies and, later, intellectual property rights and patents. State protections were essential for the early industrial development of high-income countries, as Chang¹⁴ argues for the cases of textiles in the United Kingdom, cars in Japan and Nokia phones in South Korea.

The assumption of a free market in T&D also begs the question of what we mean by the 'best' technology. In the moral economy of liberalism, the best technology is that which ensures the most efficient production for the global market, such as high yielding varieties of crops and seeds. Yet this normative framework devalues other technologies that may be more agroecologically efficient and resilient to climatic shocks.¹⁵

Perhaps most seriously, given the continued moral weight of liberalism, is the historical and geographical blind spots of theories such as comparative advantage. As Matthew Watson¹⁶ argues, Ricardo's hypothetical trade relationship between England and Portugal could not have worked in real life without the products of a third country, Portugal's colony, Brazil. In the early nineteenth century, Portugal used Brazilian gold to prop up its waning terms of trade with Great Britain. Brazilian gold, in turn, was dependent the tragic flow of people from West Africa to the Americas, who were then enslaved to provide labour for the mines and sugar plantations. Ricardo's theory, then, silences the experiences of enslaved people in Brazil, as well as the breakup of communities in West Africa, treating these as externalities, just as later economists were to treat the work of the non-human world. Yet such human and non-human externalities have been as crucial for the development of global capitalist supply chains as the moral economy itself.

The example of Caribbean sugar

In the moral economy of liberalism, engagement in global markets is the measuring rod against which different kinds of production *and* different kinds of people are deemed 'worthy'.¹⁷ Economic differentiations between *types of production* easily slip into moral differentiations between *types of people*. The fallacy of the liberal moral economy, and its dangers, is evident in the case of Caribbean sugar and its neoliberalisation in 2008. Arguing for the need for a 'Global Repositioning' of the Caribbean sugar industry, Executive Director of the Inter-American Development Bank, Richard Bernal, argued that it was the psychology of Caribbean peoples, rather than any external factor, that made the regional sugar industry uncompetitive in global markets. 'Why does the region take for granted that it can and will produce world class performers and indeed world champions in every field of sport and the creative arts but doubt that our entrepreneurs and workers can be internationally competitive?'¹⁸ Under the stranglehold of high external debts, regional actors such as Bernal may have little option but to uphold the hegemonic moral economy, according to which any divergence from collective prosperity is the fault of 'unworthy' individuals.

There are numerous other examples of this kind of moral and political deception, all of which use liberal frameworks to portray a 'harmonious view of globalization in which all countries can gain from trade liberalization'.¹⁹ Yet it is not the rhetoric, but *how it shapes actual policies regarding who gets what, why and how*, that concerns me here. Instead of acknowledging the perpetuation of past social and environmental injustices wrought by the sugar plantation, Bernal 'starts from the assumption that all economies compete on an equal playing field'.²⁰ Like textiles, cars and Nokia phones, however, sugar plantations could only rise in global importance under the protective policies of Britain's colonial regime,²¹ supports that favoured white, male plantation owners and that directly counteracted the exigencies of comparative advantage. After independence, state supports for sugar, and with them social welfare safety nets for sugar workers and their families, were withdrawn in countries deemed 'uncompetitive' in the industry such as Trinidad and Tobago. Under current 'authoritarian populist'²² regimes, prime agricultural lands are being usurped for residential and industrial development. The remaining farmers who produce high-input, specialised crops for export receive far more public resources than low-input small farmers, who feed far more people.

Covid-19: a global food systems crisis

The present moral economy of neoliberalism continues to influence where public funds are directed and who is prioritised for 'development', even though it bears less and less resemblance to the ways global supply chains actually work. Instead of sovereign nations, global supply chains are controlled by an increasingly consolidated number of companies, mostly from the Global North, who reap vast profits from managing just-in-time orders

between a global network of producers and buyers. The speed of these transactions is facilitated by complex computational systems and (mostly) European finance companies, who provide short-term credit to make up for any payment delays between producers and buyers, and trade credit insurance to ensure that producers receive money in the event of buyers' insolvency. While fixed capitals still make up all the nodes in the network, including plantations, factories, ships, trucks, etc., their operations increasingly depend on powerful umbrella companies that coordinate connections between them.

Given the interdependencies between each specialised link in the productive chain, if a shock (e.g. the pandemic) enters the system, the whole system may be compromised. Jan Douwe van der Ploeg provides a recent European example.²³ With Italian restaurants closed during periods of lockdown, the demand for luxury Italian dishes such as *vitello tonnato* (veal with tuna sauce) came to a halt. The fall in demand for veal led to a sharp drop in imports of male calves from Germany and Eastern Europe into the Netherlands, where calves are usually fattened on dairy farms and processed in slaughterhouses for shipment to Italy. During lockdown, dairy farms in the Netherlands were full of calves, who no longer provided income to the umbrella company controlling the supply chain, *Van Drie* Group. Dairy farmers in the Netherlands contended with sharp decreases in milk prices, while restaurateurs in Italy faced insolvency.²⁴

Such vulnerabilities of global supply chains have taken shape across the globe, though to varying degrees. In wealthy countries, Covid-19 has induced food shortages, panic buying, and other food system shocks, leading to empty supermarket shelves. Shelves have been restocked quickly, however, as wealthy governments such as the United States and the United Kingdom have been providing billions to back trade credit insurance providers and as supply chain data management systems adapt to the new circumstances. In poorer countries, the situation is much more calamitous. In urban areas of Africa which depend on imported plantation rice from India, Vietnam, Cambodia and Myanmar, the effects of Covid-19 are felt increasingly in the stomach, giving rise to a 'hunger pandemic' that may be deadlier than the biomedical pandemic itself.²⁵ Across the world, Covid-19 has disproportionately affected Black and Asian populations,²⁶ and the economic effects of the pandemic have hit low-income people of colour the hardest, as migrant agricultural workers are immobilised, remittances are paused and fixed capitals are unable to shift to other productive activities.

Debunking the moral economy

As citizens and states reel during the crisis, cracks in the moral economy of neoliberalism are beginning to surface. The presumed advantages of global market integration and specialisation have become increasingly questionable, not only for social movements such as Via Campesina, who have long defended the rights of 'peasants' to control their own supply chains, but for governments across the world. In Jamaica, where the sugar plantation and its legacies continues to discipline people, places and plants in the neoliberal era, the pandemic has focused government attention on small farmers and short food supply chains. In line with previous efforts, the Jamaican government is promoting a 'Say Yes to Fresh' campaign, which encourages Jamaicans to buy local produce, while the government is dealing with bottlenecks in food supply chains by buying and selling small farmers' produce directly.²⁷ In the United Kingdom, food and vegetable box schemes and local butchers have been given a boost during the pandemic, as wealthier consumers are unable to spend their extra cash on dining out.²⁸ Other UK residents have taken up gardening to overcome food shortages.²⁹ Despite these positive trends, the majority of people in the world, in the global North as well as the South, depend on global supply chains for cheap, industrially produced food.

Given their flexibility, mixed farming systems are better able to respond to external shocks than specialised farms, including climatic shocks. Low-input, family farms rely less on external markets for inputs, technologies, seeds, and labour than specialised plantations, and often market produce directly.³⁰ As Ploeg argues:³¹ 'In the framework of "modernization" such features were all considered as signs of weakness and backwardness ('legacies of the past'), but in times of Covid-19 they re-emerge as embodying resilience'. As countries halt exports of grains and other essentials to feed their populations, the pandemic is re-playing global food crises, which will continue to recur unless governments, aid agencies and civil society to come together to radically reverse moral and economic biases against domestic and subsistence agriculture.

Conclusion

Moral economies create powerful logics for perpetuating the status quo, even if the practices so endorsed are destructive to people and planet.³² The industrial capitalist food system has been enforced, legitimated and sustained through a moral economy of liberalism, which prioritises globally-derived economic value over all other values and human/non-human relationships. Given the serious failings outlined in this essay, it is alarming that Eurocentric concepts such as comparative advantage, free trade and competition, and related assumptions about 'good' economic behaviour, continue to provide the moral, political and economic grounds for global market integration.

Yet with Covid-19, the failings of this model, and its moral economic foundations, are more than ever in evidence. As Ploeg³³ argues, Covid-19 has uncovered major structural weaknesses in the global food system, namely the dominance of the financial economy over the bread and butter of real food economies. With states and citizens in both the global North and South restructuring supply chains to feed their people, now is the time to find common ground for developing a formidable counter-narrative to the moral economy of neoliberalism.

Notes

- ¹ (Virdee, 2019).
- ² (Crichlow et al., 2018).
- ³ (Brereton, 2009).
- ⁴ (Virdee, 2019; Beckford, 1972).
- ⁵ (Wilson, 2017).
- ⁶ (Scott, 1976).
- ⁷ (Wilson, 2014).
- ⁸ (Swaminathan, 2007).
- ⁹ (Watson, 2016: 257-258).
- ¹⁰ (Watson, 2016: 261).
- ¹¹ (Chang, 2009: 490).
- ¹² (Chang, 2009: 491-492).
- ¹³ (Chang, 2002).
- ¹⁴ (Chang, 2002).
- ¹⁵ (Altieri et al. 2012).
- ¹⁶ (Watson, 2016).
- ¹⁷ (Wilson, 2014: 34).
- ¹⁸ (Bernal, 2008: 20, cited in Wilson and Parmasad, 2015: 20).
- ¹⁹ (Milberg and Winkler, 2013: 1).
- ²⁰ (Wilson and Parmasad, 2015: 20).
- ²¹ (Richardson, 2009).
- ²² (Scoones et al., 2017).
- ²³ (Ploeg, 2020: 948).
- ²⁴ (Ploeg, 2020: 948).
- ²⁵ (Ploeg, 2020: 948, 950, with reference to Beasley 2020).
- ²⁶ (Razai et al., 2021).
- ²⁷ (Ewing-Chow, 2020).
- ²⁸ (Petetin, 2020: 333).
- ²⁹ (Petetin, 2020: 334).
- ³⁰ (Ploeg, 2020: 965).
- ³¹ (Ploeg, 2020: 965).
- ³² (Wilson et al., 2020).
- ³³ (Ploeg, 2020).

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